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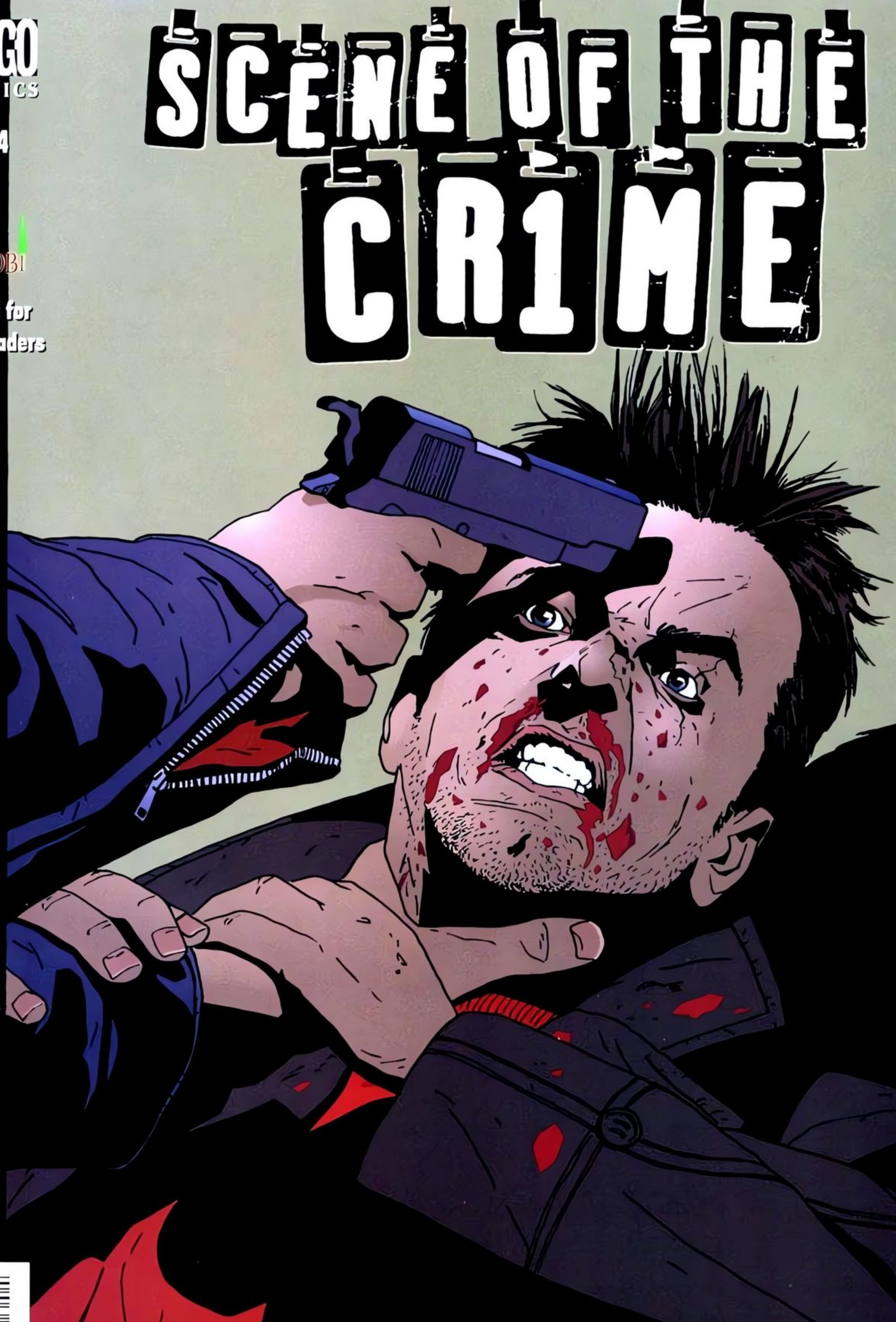
SCENE OF THE CRIME



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A Little Piece of Goodnight

Ed Brubaker · Michael Lark · Sean Phillips

chapter twelve

I was up into the late hours of the morning trying to digest this new information and figure out how it might connect to the murder.

Geoff Jordan, father of Maggie and Alex, had died in the Earthlings fire in '83, along with eleven other people.

His wife had identified the charred remains of his corpse. He was one of the LUCKY ones.

Some of the other victims were barely existent--Bone fragments, a few teeth, nothing more.

Virgil Peterson, the leader of the Earthlings, was assumed to be one of those unidentifiable bodies, because he apparently hadn't survived the fire.

IN COMMUNE FIRE

But it was ALSO assumed that he was behind the blaze in the first place.

And now, with the similarity in the philosophies of Peterson and Mitchell Luna, and the connection to the Jordans, I had to wonder if Virgil Peterson hadn't walked away from that fire and into a new life.

The resemblance between the two was slight, but it was there, and you never knew what a little reconstructive surgery and fifteen years on the run could do to a face.

And if Mitchell Luna was the man responsible for the death of her father, that gave Maggie a pretty solid motive for blackmail.

But this theory still left me with plenty of unanswered questions.

Questions I didn't really want to ask, but that I knew I would...

Like why would Maggie need to sleep with Luna to find out if he was Peterson?

And how much did her sister or mother know about this whole plan?

If either of them were in on it, then why did she disappear?

One thing I felt certain of was that Alexandra Jordan knew a lot more than she had let on to when she hired me.

And the things she'd kept to herself had gotten Maggie killed.

A LITTLE PIECE OF GOODNIGHT

part three of four

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I would have been willing to wait all day for my answers, but luckily, I didn't have to. Alex appeared with Paul Raymonds a little after 8:30.

I'D SAY GOOD MORNING, BUT WE *ALL* KNOW WHAT A JOKE THAT WOULD BE.

PAUL, WHAT'S HE DOING HERE?

WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU *DOING*, JACK? I THOUGHT WE *UNDERSTOOD* EACH OTHER.

WE DO, IT'S JUST THAT I DON'T THINK EITHER OF US REALLY UNDER-STANDS *HER*.

WHAT'S HE *TALKING* ABOUT?!

I THINK YOU'D BETTER STEP DOWN HERE, FRIEND.

BE MY "FRIEND" THEN --YOU TOLD ME YESTERDAY THAT YOU'D HELP IF I ASKED, SO NOW I'M *ASKING*...

I JUST WANT A FEW MINUTES WITH MY CLIENT.

PAUL...?

TWO MINUTES. THAT'S IT.

FINE.

I CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT YOU--

LEMME *TELL* YOU THEN. I THINK THAT YOU *KNEW* MAGGIE HAD GONE TO STAY AT LUNARHOUSE, AND I THINK YOU MIGHT EVEN HAVE PUT HER *UP* TO IT.

WHY WOULD I HAVE DONE *THAT*?

BECAUSE YOU *BOTH* KNEW THAT MITCHELL LUNA WAS REALLY THE MAN WHO KILLED YOUR FATHER, AND YOU KNEW THAT SECRET WAS WORTH A LOT TO HIM.

I... I DON'T... *UH*... DON'T...

BUT SOMETHING WENT WRONG, DIDN'T IT? MAGGIE CHANGED HER MIND, OR GOT *SELFISH*-- OR SHE GOT SCARED OF THE WHOLE THING, AND SO SHE SPLIT. *THAT'S* WHY YOU DIDN'T WANNA INVOLVE THE POLICE!

"OH, EXCUSE ME, MY SISTER AND I WERE *BLACK-MAILING* SOMEONE AND SHE SEEMS TO HAVE GONE MISSING."

AND THEN SHE ENDS UP LIKE *THIS*! NOT PART OF THE PLAN, *HUH*?

THAT'S *NOT* WHAT HAPPENED!

THEN WHAT DID?

WE WEREN'T GOING TO BLACKMAIL HIM, WE WERE GOING TO GET HIM *BACK*... MAGGIE WAS JUST SUPPOSED TO FIND OUT IF HE WAS REALLY VIRGIL, BECAUSE HE MIGHT'VE RECOGNIZED ME.

JESUS...

WE WERE GOING TO TURN HIM IN TO THE *POLICE*... I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO MAGGIE, WHY SHE CHANGED HER MIND... THAT BASTARD HAS A WAY OF GETTING INTO YOUR *HEAD*... TURNING THINGS AROUND...

WE SHOULD HAVE JUST KILLED HIM...

Her hate was a kind I knew well, and there was no amount of rain or tears that would wash it away.

chapter thirteen

EXIT

I had to meet Steve at about 4:00 pm for our trip up to the Lunarhouse compound in Santa Rosa, so I hoped to get some sleep before then.

My talk with Alex had confirmed some of my suspicions, but it had brought up new questions that only Luna could answer. And even with Steve along, I doubted I'd get anything out of Luna.

IS MR. HERRIMAN EVER *ACTUALLY* HERE? I MEAN, IN THE GALLERY?

NOT AS OFTEN AS I'D LIKE, THAT'S FOR SURE...

I JUST GOTTA MEET HIM BEFORE HE *DIES*. HE'S BEEN SUCH A *HUGE* INFLUENCE ON MY *ART*.

WELL, YOU'D BETTER COME BACK *SOON*, IN THAT CASE. YOU NEVER CAN TELL WHEN US OLD FOLKS ARE GONNA *GO*.

CHARMING... REALLY.

WELL, IT LOOKS LIKE YOU GUYS WERE RIGHT ABOUT THE *PETERSON-LUNA* CONNECTION --

-- BUT ALEX CLAIMS THEY WERE JUST GOING TO TURN HIM IN...

AND YOU DON'T QUITE BELIEVE HER? BECAUSE SHE LIED BEFORE?

NO, IT'S NOT JUST THAT... SHE JUST HAS *SO MUCH* HATRED FOR THIS GUY...

AND I STILL DON'T FEEL LIKE I'VE GOT THE WHOLE STORY... WHY DID PETERSON BURN DOWN THE EARTHLINGS COMMUNE?

IF IT WAS AN *ACCIDENT*, WHY WOULD SHE HATE HIM SO MUCH FOR SO LONG... AND IF IT WAS ARSON, LIKE THE POLICE THOUGHT, THEN WHAT WAS THE *MOTIVE*?

SEEMS LIKE THOSE ARE ALL GOOD QUESTIONS TO BE ASKING.

SURE, BUT WHO DO I ASK? ALEX ISN'T EXACTLY FORTHCOMING OR RELIABLE, AND *LUNA* HAS AN ARMED GUARD...

WHY DON'T YOU ASK SOME OF THE OTHER SURVIVORS? SOME OF THEM *MUST* HAVE STAYED IN THE AREA, DON'T YOU THINK?

I GUESS SO... JESUS, WHY DIDN'T I THINK OF THAT?

It took a few hours of cross-referencing names from the old police report with local phonebooks, but I came up with a few addresses.

I headed over to Berkeley to check out a Ms. Stormy Sagebrush. She and her daughter Sandy had both lived at the Earthlings commune.

KCK NCK

YES... WAS THERE SOMETHING YOU WANTED?

OH, HI... I THOUGHT NO ONE WAS HOME... I'M LOOKING FOR STORMY SAGEBRUSH.

SORRY, SHE'S NOT IN...

WAIT-- YOU WOULDN'T BE SANDY, WOULD YOU? MAYBE YOU COULD HELP ME...

HOW?

I'M A DETECTIVE LOOKING INTO A MURDER THAT MIGHT BE CONNECTED TO THE *FIRE* IN '83... YOU KNOW THE ONE I MEAN...?

YEAH, I *KNOW* IT... I GUESS YOU SHOULD COME IN...

I HOPE IT'S OKAY WITH YOU IF I LEAVE THE CURTAINS DRAWN...

HEY, IT'S YOUR HOUSE... SENSITIVE TO LIGHT, HUH?

SOMETHING LIKE THAT. SO WHAT'S THIS ABOUT A MURDER?

YOU MIGHT'VE READ ABOUT IT IN THE PAPERS IN THE LAST DAY OR SO. A YOUNG GIRL WAS SHOT IN HER MOTEL ROOM IN SANTA CRUZ...

SORRY, I DON'T REALLY KEEP UP WITH THE NEWS.

WELL, I THINK YOU KNEW HER... WHEN YOU WERE KIDS... MAGGIE JORDAN?

MAGGIE? THAT'S FUNNY.

SOMEBODY KILLED THAT SPOILED LITTLE BITCH.

WHAT DID *YOU* HAVE AGAINST MAGGIE?

SHE JUST THOUGHT SHE WAS SO FUCKING *PERFECT*. ALWAYS COMING AROUND TRYING TO HELP ME... I DIDN'T NEED HER PITY.

WELL, I'M TRYING TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE *EARTHLINGS*, AND THE FIRE...

...AND REALLY, JUST *ANYTHING* YOU CAN REMEMBER ABOUT THAT TIME... IF IT'S OKAY...

SURE. WHATEVER... WHAT D'YOU WANNA KNOW?

THE POLICE SAID THAT VIRGIL PETERSON STARTED THE FIRE, *AND* THAT HE DIED IN IT. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER?

"I DON'T KNOW WHO LIT THAT FIRE, BUT I KNOW IT STARTED IN THE KID'S DORM AND SPREAD TO THE MAIN HOUSE. SUDDENLY THERE WERE JUST FLAMES EVERY-WHERE..."

KIDS' *DORM*?

YEAH, WE LIVED SEPARATELY FROM THE GROWN-UPS IN A CONVERTED GARAGE SO THEY COULD BE UNFET-TERED, OR SOME CRAP.

YOU MEAN YOU *SLEPT* THERE, AWAY FROM YOUR PARENTS?

"NO, WE LIVED THERE. THE ADULTS WATCHED US IN SHIFTS, ONE AT A TIME. BUT FOR THE MOST PART WE WERE ON OUR OWN."

MOM ALWAYS SAID THAT PLACE BURNED DOWN AT A REAL CONVENIENT TIME. A *LOT* OF BAD SHIT WAS GOING DOWN --

-- SUPPOSEDLY THE *COPS* WERE LOOKING INTO VIRGIL AND SOME OF THE OTHERS.

SHE EVER SAY WHAT IT WAS ALL *ABOUT?*

WHAT WAS IT, THEN?

SHE DIDN'T HAVE TO, I *KNEW*...

A FUCKING NIGHTMARE...

... LOOK, I'M *NOT* GONNA GET INTO ALL THIS WITH YOU, ASSHOLE. WHY DON'T YOU GO FIND SOMEONE ELSE TO TORTURE?

I'M SORRY... BUT I HAVE'TA ASK, DID YOU SEE VIRGIL DURING THE FIRE AT *ALL*?

I DIDN'T SEE *ANYTHING*, OKAY? I WAS JUST TRYING TO GET OUT. BUT EVERYONE KNOWS THAT HE DIED IN THERE.

MAGGIE AND HER SISTER DIDN'T SEEM TO THINK SO. DOES THIS MAN LOOK *ANYTHING* LIKE VIRGIL PETERSON TO YOU?

NO. IT'S NOT HIM. IT'S *NOT* VIRGIL.

LOOK CLOSELY... ARE YOU SURE?

LOOK AT ME--LOOK AT WHAT THAT *FUCKER* DID TO ME... DO YOU THINK I COULD *EVER* FORGET HIM?

chapter fourteen

As usual, I got stuck in traffic on the Bay Bridge coming back into the city. If wouldn't have been a big deal, but I felt antsy-- I just wanted to keep moving.

I couldn't get Sandy's tortured face out of my mind.

SO I WAS THANKFUL THAT STEVE WAS WAITING FOR ME BY THE TIME I GOT BACK TO THE SHOP...

--AND HE LANDS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STAIRS AND DOESN'T WAKE UP FOR A FUCKING WEEK!!

HA! HA! HA!... THAT'S A GOOD ONE, KID. YOU CAN'T BE TAKIN' NO SHIT!

HEY, KIDDO, Y'KNOW YOU COULD LEARN A FEW THINGS FROM THIS GUY.

SO I'VE BEEN TOLD.

JESUS JACK, YOU LOOK LIKE HELL! DID YOU GET ANY SLEEP LAST NIGHT, OR IS THIS STILL YOUR HANGOVER?

VERY FUNNY. ESPECIALLY COMING FROM YOU, WHO I'M SURE HAD NO HANGOVER WHATSOEVER, RIGHT?

FUCK NO. HANGOVERS ARE FOR FAGS.

YOU OKAY TO DRIVE?

YEAH, I'VE JUST HAD ENOUGH TO LOOSEN ME UP. I'LL BE FINE...

THEN LET'S GO.

YOU KIDS SURE YOU DON'T NEED AN EXTRA HAND OUT THERE? I CAN FOLLOW YOU UP OR--

NOT THIS TIME, KNUT. IT COULD GET UGLY, SO I HAD TO BRING MY EXPENDABLE BACKUP.

HEY! THAT HURTS, MAN!

JUST BE CAREFUL, OKAY?

DON'T WORRY, I'LL TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR NEW BEST FRIEND.

An hour and a half later we were on the outskirts of Santa Rosa, just out of sight of the Lunarhouse compound. I had filled Steve in on everything during the drive...

SO, DO WE THINK HE'S THE GUY OR NOT?

I DON'T KNOW... IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER, THOUGH, BECAUSE HE'S STILL THE ONLY ONE WHO KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED TO MAGGIE... WHOEVER HE IS.

I GUESS SO... MAN, I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE YOU WENT AND SAW GWEN...

I WAS DRUNK, OKAY? LET'S DROP IT.

WHATEVER YOU SAY... SO HERE'S THE PLAN...

"...LOOKS LIKE FRIDAY NIGHT IS PRETTY HAPPENING OUT HERE, PEOPLE COMING AND GOING EVERY TEN MINUTES OR SO...

NO TRESPAS PRIVATE PROPERTY

"...ONE OF THE PULLWALTERS IS MANNING THE GATE, WHICH COULD BE A PROBLEM...

"BUT I THINK IF WE JUST WAIT ANOTHER HOUR, HE'LL PROBABLY BE FUCKED-UP ENOUGH TO JUST LET US DRIVE RIGHT IN. AND IF HE'S NOT, THEN... I'LL DEAL WITH HIM."

THAT'S YOUR PLAN?! WE JUST GO RIGHT THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR?

WHAT?! YOU WANNA CLIMB OVER THAT RAZOR-WIRE?

NOT ME, BROTHER. I'LL TAKE MY CHANCES WITH THE BIG HIPPIE...

JESUS...

JUST RELAX, MAN. SO AFTER WE'RE IN, IT SHOULD BE EASY. THE PLACE'S PACKED WITH STONERS, AND THEY'LL TOTALLY IGNORE US.

WE JUST HAVE TO FIND LUNA AND CORNER HIM FOR A FEW MINUTES.

THEN WE'RE OUTTA THERE.

OH, YEAH... EASY. AND WHAT IF LUNA WON'T COOPERATE?

THAT'S NOT GONNA BE A PROBLEM.

So we watched whichever Pullwalter was on the gate smoke two more joints, and then we just drove right up...

I pulled on an old ball cap so I wouldn't be recognized.

BDEEP! BDEEPP!

HOLD ON, ASSHOLE...

SEE, I TOLD YOU...

MAYBE YOU SHOULD AT LEAST TAKE OFF THE FEDORA.

JUST KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN AND TRY TO LOOK HIGH, SMART GUY.

HEY, WHO THE FUCK 'RE YOU?

C'MON, JASON, WE FUCKIN' MET YOU LAST WEEK IN THE CITY. LET US IN, MAN...

I'M JUSTIN, ASSHOLE.

NOW GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!

HEY, C'MON MAN... IT'S NOT LIKE YOU GUYS DON'T LOOK ALIKE OR NOTHIN'...

JESUS FUCKING CHRIST, IS HE DEAD?

NAH, HE'S JUST A BIG PUSSY IS ALL. FUCKING ONE SHOT AND HE'S OUT... GOD...

I TOLD YOU TO GET RID OF THE HAT.

YEAH YEAH... HERE, HELP ME DUMP HIM IN THOSE BUSHES.

WE MEET BACK HERE IN ABOUT FIFTEEN MINUTES, OKAY? JUST BE CAREFUL... VERY LOW PROFILE...

NO DUH... YOU TOO, HUH? TRY NOT TO KILL ANYONE...

Leave it to hippies. The middle of winter and they're STILL dancing around naked.

BUMM

BU BU

BUMMM BU BU

BUMM BU DA BUMM BU

After searching the crowd for about ten minutes, I decided to check the main house...

GET IT TOGETHER, MAN!! WE FUCKIN' NEED YOU!

YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND... JUST GET OUT... I'LL BE FINE...

DON'T FUCKIN' WUSS OUT ON ME NOW, MAN!!

THEY'RE GONNA BE HERE SOON, AND YOU GOTTA BE THERE! REALLY THERE, MAN!!

HEY, DUDE...

JUST HOLD ON A--

HE'S BLEEDING ALL OVER MY FUCKING COUCH... JESUS... WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH HIM?

FUCK HIM. HE'S DEAD MEAT. I WANT THE OTHER ONE, TOO. LOOK AT MY *NOSE*! *FUCK*!

THE GUYS ARE LOOKIN' FOR HIM... YOU JUST TAKE IT *EASY*. WE CAN'T AFFORD ANY TROUBLE TONIGHT...

I DIDN'T START NO TROUBLE, BUT I'LL *FUCKIN'* *FINISH* IT!

YOU WON'T DO *SHIT* UNLESS I SAY SO! I GOT ENOUGH HASSLES WITH MITCH CRYN' OVER SOME CHICK. I DON'T NEED *YOUR* CRAP ON TOP OF IT!!

THAT SEEMS A BIT UNCALLED-FOR...

LET'S JUST DEAL WITH THE FUCKIN' *PROBLEM*, OKAY? WE'VE GOT ABOUT A HALF HOUR TO GET READY, AND WE DON'T NEED ANY *MORE* SURPRISES.

WELL, WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO? WE CAN'T JUST LET JUSTIN *KILL* HIM...?

GOD, GROW THE FUCK *UP*, MITCH... THERE'S NO WAY HE'S WALKIN' OUTTA HERE...

LUNA! *FIRE*! THE CROP IS ON *FIRE*!!

WHAT?! NO!! NO *WAY*!

FUCKING *HELL*!!

GET THE FUCKIN' WATER PUMP!!

NO! NO! NOT AGAIN!

THE GUYS ARE ON IT ALREADY, JASE... WE GOTTA GET THESE PEOPLE--

YOU AND YOUR BUDDY ARE RUINING OUR WHOLE NIGHT.

HEY! JUST EASE UP, MAN...

TIME TO SAY "GOOD NIGHT"... I'D TAKE MORE TIME ON YOU IF I COULD, BUT--

ARRRR!

FUCK YOU!

I GUESS YOU DIDN'T NEED ME AFTER ALL...

NAH, YOU WERE RIGHT... HE'S JUST A BIG PUSSY.

WE SHOULD GET THE FUCK OUTTA HERE...

HOW'S MY NOSE LOOK?

I'M PRETTY SURE THEY CAN SAVE IT...

SO WHERE THE HELL WERE YOU? I THOUGHT YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BE MY BACKUP...

I SAW THAT ASSHOLE GO TO HIS CAR FOR HIS SHOTGUN, SO I DECIDED TO *WIRE* IT, IN CASE WE NEEDED TO FOLLOW HIM LATER...

AND BY THE TIME I GOT UP TO THE HOUSE, THEY WERE ALREADY CARRYING YOU INSIDE...

THEN I SEE THREE OTHER GUYS RUNNING AROUND WITH GUNS, SO I FIGURE I NEED A LITTLE *DISTRACTION*...

HNNK BDEEP! BDEEP! HNNK! RRNK!

SO, WHAT... YOU LIT THEIR POT FIELD ON FIRE?

THEY GOT A WHOLE *ACRE* OF THAT DEVIL WEED GROWING BACK THERE. YOU SHOULD'A SEEN IT GO UP. I FEEL A LITTLE HIGH JUST FROM THE *SMOKE*...

SOUNDED LIKE THEY HAD SOME BIG DEAL GOIN' DOWN TONIGHT... GUESS WE SCREWED *THAT* UP FOR THEM...

I GUESS LUNA DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING USEFUL?

NOT WHILE I WAS *CONSCIOUS*... HE DID SEEM PRETTY UPSET ABOUT SOMETHING, THOUGH...

WELL, WE CAN JUST TRACK THEM TOMORROW... THIS COULD BE A BLESSING IN DISGUISE...

I *STILL* DON'T GET WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG ONCE YOU STARTED THE FIRE... THAT COCK-SUCKER ALMOST *KILLED* ME...

WHEEOOO WHEEOOO

I HAD TO CALL THE *PIGS*... JUST TO MAKE SURE MY DIVERSION WAS BIG ENOUGH...

OH... I GUESS IT'S OKAY, THEN...

chapter fifteen

I didn't really feel up to facing Knut and Molly after I got out of the Emergency Room, so I decided to wander around for awhile.

AMBULANCE ENTRANCE

EMERGENCY

I couldn't stop thinking about all the fucked-up childhoods that had been colliding with my world lately...

Their eyes were all blinking in my mind--the cold, dead stares, and the fractured faroff looks, full of held-back tears and fake courage.

Why were we all ending up with guns in our mouths or needles in our arms? Did anyone actually grow up undamaged, or did some just hide the scars better than others?

I knew I was lucky to have survived my own anger at the world--all the nights I had done whatever it took to wipe myself out...

DINER

LUCY'S

But thinking about that made me remember that I hadn't just survived alone... Gwen had been there with me, holding me up... giving me more love than I could ever have earned.

WOW, I GUESS MY WISH CAME TRUE, AFTER ALL.

I THOUGHT YOU NEVER WANTED TO SEE ME AGAIN...

NO, I MEAN THE WAY SOME-ONE SMASHED YOUR *FACE* IN.

I GUESS I DESERVE THAT...

WHAT ARE YOU EVEN *DOING* HERE, JACK? YOU'RE NOT DRUNK *THIS* TIME...

NO... I JUST... I JUST WANTED TO TALK TO YOU.

GOD, THIS IS SO TYPICAL. YOU'RE HAVING A BAD DAY, AND NOW I'M SUPPOSED TO MAKE IT ALL BETTER FOR YOU... AFTER EVERYTHING YOU DID TO ME...

THAT'S NOT WHY I'M HERE, REALLY, IT'S NOT...

THEN WHY?

BECAUSE YOU DESERVE AN EXPLANATION, AT LEAST AS MUCH OF ONE AS I CAN GIVE...

DID IT EVER OCCUR TO YOU THAT I MIGHT NOT GIVE A SHIT ANYMORE? THAT IT MIGHT BE A LITTLE LATE FOR EXCUSES?

YEAH... IT DID... BUT I KNOW YOU.

GOD... DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE, JACK? TO HAVE SOMEONE JUST TURN OFF THEIR FEELINGS, CUT YOU RIGHT OUT OF THEIR LIFE-- LIKE FLIPPING A SWITCH OR SOMETHING... AND SUDDENLY YOU HAVE NO SIGNIFICANCE TO THEM AT ALL?

IS THAT WHAT YOU THINK? THAT I STOPPED CARING? OR THAT I DIDN'T MISS YOU? BECAUSE THAT'S NOT TRUE!

IT MIGHT AS WELL BE-- THE RESULT WAS THE SAME. IF YOU MISSED ME OR LOVED ME, I NEVER KNEW IT... IT DIDN'T AFFECT MY LIFE...

NO... I GUESS NOT...

SO, GO AHEAD... TELL ME... WHAT HAPPENED?

WELL... IT'S JUST... IT... SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED... I DID SOMETHING... AND I HAD TO MAKE A CHOICE... I COULD FEEL IT ALL BURNING UP INSIDE ME, AND I KNEW IF I DIDN'T GET AWAY... DIDN'T GET CLEAN... REALLY... THAT I'D BE DEAD SOON, AND PROBABLY SO WOULD YOU.

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? WHAT DID YOU DO?

I CAN'T... I CAN'T SAY... I JUST FELT LIKE I HAD THIS ONE LAST CHANCE AT LIFE... BUT I HAD TO GET AWAY FROM DOPE, AND THAT WHOLE WORLD... INCLUDING YOU.

I'M SORRY... I FUCKED UP. I SHOULDN'T HAVE LEFT YOU.

NO... YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE... I NEEDED YOU.

I KNOW. I NEEDED YOU, TOO.

GOD, YOU'RE SUCH AN ASSHOLE ... YOU KNOW THAT?

YEAH, I DO.

chapter sixteen

All the lights in the apartment above the shop were out, so it seemed like it was safe to go home.

In spite of the beating I'd taken and my lack of sleep in the past few days, I was actually feeling okay. Talking to Gwen had felt good... One more small weight lifted from my conscience.

So naturally something had to spoil any minor relief I might have felt...

MISTER HERRIMAN!

MRS. JORDAN, HOW *LOVELY* TO SEE YOU...

I HAVE HALF A MIND TO SET THE *POLICE* ON YOU, YOU BASTARD!

WHAT RIGHT DO YOU HAVE UPSETTING MY DAUGHTER ANY FURTHER?! HAVEN'T YOU DONE *ENOUGH* DAMAGE TO MY FAMILY?

LADY, LET'S NOT EVEN GO THERE, ALL RIGHT? YOUR FAMILY WAS FUCKED-UP *LONG* BEFORE I GOT ANYWHERE NEAR THEM.

NOW IF YOU WANT TO TAKE THIS CONVERSATION INDOORS, THAT'S FINE WITH ME...

...PERSONALLY, I'M TOO TIRED TO ARGUE WITH YOU ANYMORE, AND I'M GETTING PRETTY GOD-DAMN SICK OF THIS RAIN...

WELL, BUT I...

C'MON...YOU DIDN'T WAIT AROUND ALL NIGHT JUST TO YELL AT ME FOR TWO SECONDS, DID YOU?

NO, I DON'T SUPPOSE I DID...

BESIDES, THERE'S SOMETHING I WANT YOU TO TAKE A *LOOK* AT...

I THINK THIS MIGHT BE *YOU*, RIGHT HERE, BUT IT'S HARD TO TELL.

OH MY GOD...

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BOTH YOUR DAUGHTERS STARTED *RIGHT THERE*... AND I MET ANOTHER GIRL TODAY WHOSE LIFE WAS RUINED BY THAT FIRE... AND THAT COMMUNE.

I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY *WHY* MAGGIE WAS KILLED, BUT I KNOW THAT IT WAS CONNECTED TO THAT PLACE, AND THE FIRE, AND THE DEATH OF HER FATHER.

SO DON'T YOU GO TRYING TO PUT ALL YOUR BLAME OFF ON *ME*. I FEEL BAD ENOUGH ALREADY.

YOU'RE THE ONE WHO BROUGHT YOUR KIDS INTO THAT PLACE, AND GOD *KNOWS* WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM THERE...

I'M JUST CLEANIN' UP YOUR MESS...

WE WERE JUST CHILDREN OURSELVES... WE MADE MISTAKES... I TRIED TO MAKE IT UP TO THEM... I WAS SORRY...

LOOK, IF YOU REALLY WANT TO HELP THEM, THEN HELP *ME* NOW...

TELL ME WHAT WAS GOING ON AT THE EARTHLINGS' COMMUNE ...WHY WERE THE POLICE LOOKING INTO *VIRGIL PETERSON*?

YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND... I DIDN'T REALLY *KNOW* WHAT WAS GOING ON AT THE TIME...

I WAS HIGH A LOT... I MEAN, THAT WAS *SUPPOSED* TO BE PART OF THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE...

"THAT AND THE SEX... VIRGIL SAID WE SHOULD BE MUCH MORE OPEN ABOUT OUR SEXUALITY... THAT OUR ORGASMS WERE POWERFUL THINGS... IT WAS A FAIRLY OLD IDEA BY THAT POINT, I SUPPOSE... BUT I WAS FROM A LITTLE TOWN IN THE MIDWEST THAT HAD GOTTEN COMPLETELY PASSED OVER BY THE '60S...

"AND IN SAN FRANCISCO, THE '70S WERE STILL SORT OF LIKE THE '60S TO A LOT OF PEOPLE... WE MET VIRGIL IN '75, AND I WAS ALREADY A MOTHER OF TWO... I SAW MY LIFE JUST PASSING ME BY... SO DID GEOFF...

"SO WE DROPPED OUT... WE WENT TO LIVE A DIFFERENT KIND OF LIFE ... BUT IT GOT UGLY AFTER AWHILE. VIRGIL HAD US ALL THINKING WE WERE DOING THE RIGHT THING, BREAKING ALL OF SOCIETY'S RULES... BUT OUR WHOLE LIVES SLOWLY BECAME ABOUT NOTHING BUT DRUGS AND SEX...

"THE CHILDREN WERE ALL KEPT SEPARATE FROM US... IN THEIR OWN HOUSE... IT SEEMED SO SMART AT THE TIME. THAT WAY WE DIDN'T HAVE TO SACRIFICE ALL OF OUR TIME FOR THEM. BUT... THAT GOT UGLY, TOO..."

VIRGIL THOUGHT THE CHILDREN SHOULD GET IN TOUCH WITH THEIR *SEXUAL* SIDE AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE, SO HE WAS ENCOURAGING THEM TO EXPERIMENT WITH EACH OTHER. BUT THAT WASN'T ENOUGH... HE STARTED MAKING SOME OF THE GIRLS GIVE HIM *HEAD*. HE CLAIMED HE WAS JUST *TEACHING* THEM, BUT...

JESUS... AND YOU LET THIS *GO ON?* EVERYONE KNEW ABOUT THIS?

NOT IN THE *BEGINNING*... BUT IT DIDN'T STOP THERE... SOON HE WAS SCREWING THEM... OUR LITTLE GIRLS. AND THEN SOME OF THE *OTHER* MEN STARTED IN, AS WELL...

IT WAS JUST MORE *SEX* TO MOST OF THEM... BREAKING MORE TABOOS...

SOMEONE MUST HAVE SAID THIS WAS *NOT* OKAY, RIGHT?

ONE OF THE GIRLS GOT PREGNANT AND THERE WAS A *BIG* FIGHT ABOUT IT. A FEW FAMILIES PULLED OUT OF THE COMMUNE, AND SOME OF THEM WENT TO THE *POLICE*, OR AT LEAST *THREATENED* TO...

SO THAT'S WHY VIRGIL TORCHED THE PLACE?

WHAT? VIRGIL DIDN'T START THAT FIRE.

HE DIDN'T?

NO, MAGGIE DID...

MAGGIE *ALWAYS* STARTED FIRES.

to be concluded

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